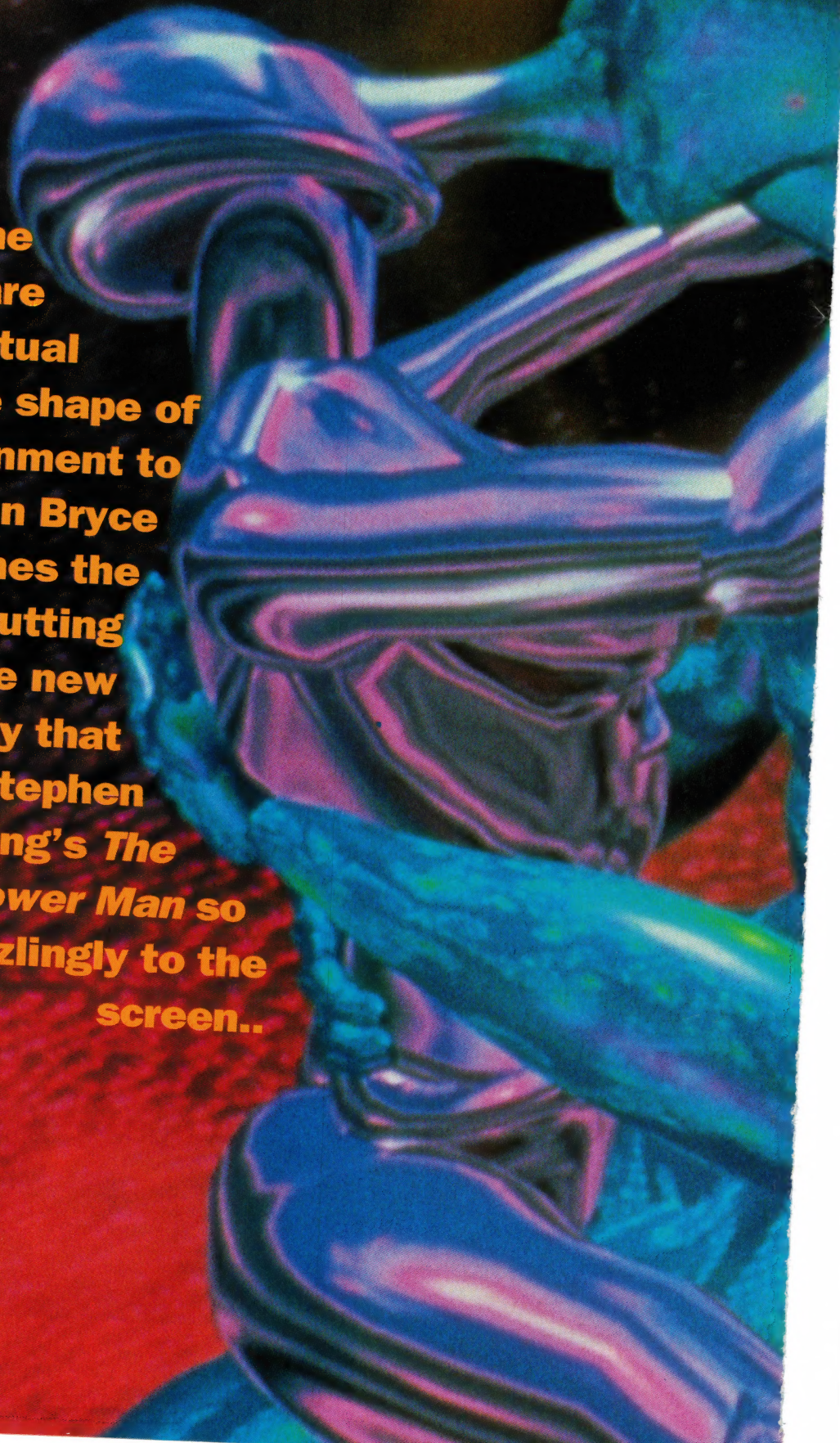
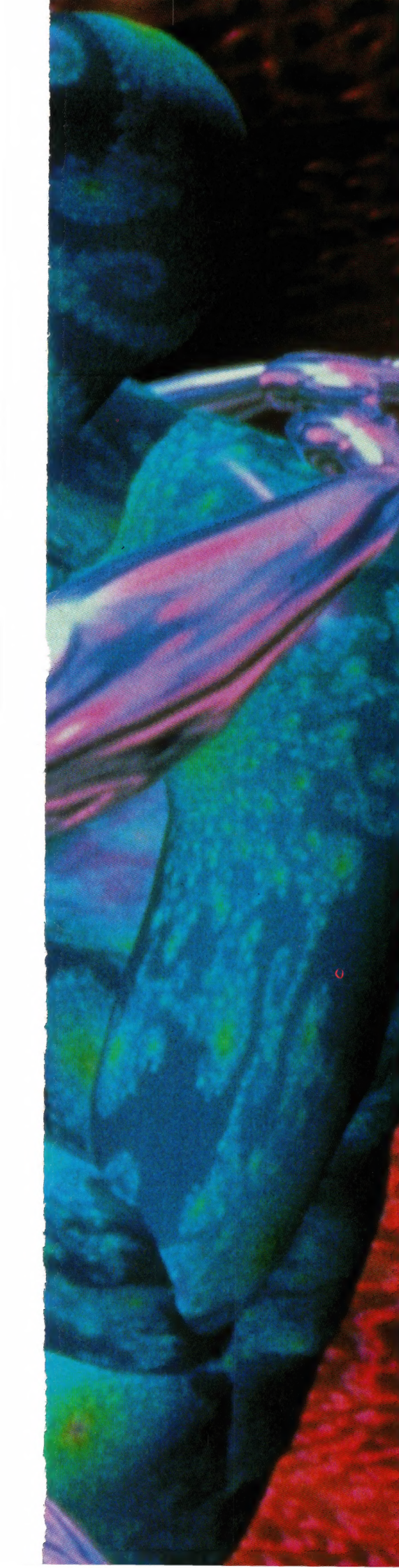


once byten...

When the
(micro) chips are
down, is Virtual
Reality the shape of
movie entertainment to
come? Allan Bryce
examines the
(grass) cutting
edge of the new
technology that
brought Stephen
King's *The
Lawnmower Man* so
dazzlingly to the
screen..





When the name 'Stephen King' is linked to the word 'lawnmower', suburban landscaping is not the first image that springs to mind. So, when you tune-in to the new Stephen King movie, *The Lawnmower Man* and watch the camera caress a gleaming, souped-up power mower, you just know that eventually those blades are going to be running over more than crabgrass. Watch the shrubby fella, but don't miss that torso.

There are many more surprises in store here, because *Lawnmower Man* isn't just one more (yawn) adaptation of the Maine man's work. What sets it apart from the crowd and has turned it into a huge box-office success is the fact that it employs eye-popping computer graphics and claims to be the first movie ever to explore the intriguing new world of Virtual Reality (or VR for short).

Unless you happen to have spent the last year or so holidaying on the moon, or have been unfortunate enough to have been taken hostage by a terrorist group, the chances are that you will already have heard something about VR. "It's the next big thing" is the message coming across on programmes like *Tomorrow's World*. Small wonder so many big companies have committed millions to developing it, because when you start to investigate the possibilities, VR's applications for both business and pleasure seem endless and highly lucrative.

In a nutshell, Virtual Reality is an up and coming computer development that allows the user, through the use of specially designed goggles, gloves and body suit, to literally get inside a computer-generated world and experience it first-hand. This takes computer games one giant step forward - you literally become part of the machine, surrounded by weird, alien sights and sounds. From a business point of view VR is already enabling architects to walk around inside computer-generated images of their building projects, making sure that the properties are user-friendly even before the first foundations are laid.

If VR does take off, as the experts predict, in ten years time we could all be spending our recreational hours in anti-social jaunts round a microchip universe - while our VCRs gather dust in the attic. But at the moment it's still too expensive a toy for the home user to be able to afford. You can get a preview of it, though, in the aforementioned movie, released on the First Independent label this month.

The film tells of a scientist (Pierce Brosnan) who is using VR for an intelligence-accelerating experiment. His chosen subject is mentally retarded gardener Jobe (Jeff Fahey) - the lawnmower man of the title. The combination of a mind-expanding drug and a number of brain-boggling trips into a bizarre computer-generated universe soon have Jobe cooking on all mental cylinders. But the top secret organisation behind the

experiment, start tampering with Brosnan's work. They want a Jobe with super-mental powers. What they get, is an uncontrollable super-being with an expanded sense of aggression, who now has a new aim in life apart from cutting grass - world domination! Though *The Lawnmower Man* is ostensibly based on a short story by Stephen King (first published in his much-plundered *Night Shift* collection), it really bears very little resemblance to the original tale. In fact King himself was so miffed about it being sold as one of his celluloid stepchildren that he took out a court injunction against the producers. Thus you won't see the Stephen King prefix appearing before the title on your video cassette. We're sure he didn't return his fee, though...

At the helm of the project is Brett Leonard, a youngster who had previously enjoyed some degree of commercial success with a low-budget, direct-to-video gore flick called *The Dead Pit* (recently released here by Colourbox). Leonard says that when he was first approached to direct, he had some serious misgivings about doing yet another bland Stephen King adaptation. "I told them there wasn't a movie in a seven-page short story about a guy being chased by a lawnmower," laughs Leonard. "But they said they were developing it and wanted to know if I had any ideas."

Leonard did indeed have an idea. He wanted to combine the King story with an existing script he had co-written with Gemil Everet about a Virtual Reality experiment gone awry, a kind of cross between the award winning science-fiction short, *Flowers For Algerno* (filmed as *Charly* in 1968) and *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970). "I would describe Virtual Reality as a better TV set," says Leonard. "Some people think of it as revolutionary. I would say it's evolutionary."

Computers and computer-generated special effects have come a long way over the past decade. The microchip revolution has enabled us to fit on small desktop machines that which would previously have filled a whole room. Hollywood effects aces have made full use of the expanded 'brainpower' more advanced machines offer. Rather than using detailed model kits suspended on wires against a blue effects screen, movies like *The Last Starfighter* and *2010* created all their spacecraft by advanced computer imaging - and how many of you out there noticed the difference?

In more recent times remarkably lifelike computer images have found their way into movies like *The Abyss* and *Terminator 2* - showing us sights (the incredible living water/liquid metal effects, for example) that traditional effects technology could not possibly handle.

One fully expects to see staggering special effects on mega-budget movies like *T2* and *Star Trek VI*, but it's unusual to find amazing computer graphics applied to a relatively low budget project like *The*

Lawnmower Man, which was filmed at the cost of just \$10 million. "The key is that hardware graphics have matured. The price of the computer has come way down and the software technology has gone way up,"

explains Brad Hunt, director of the computer company responsible for the film's VR effects.

Hunt's Angel Studios created eight minutes of effects for the film using the company's

custom Scenix software. To create the cybernetic image of Fahey (known as CyberJobe), Angel digitised a photograph of the actor, lip-synching the computer graphic to the actor's voice. A grid pattern drawn on

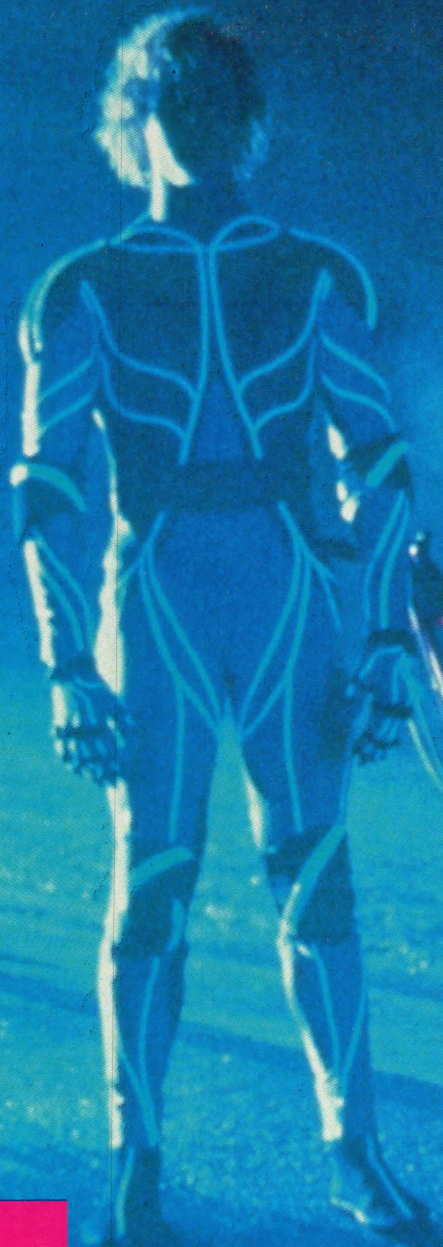
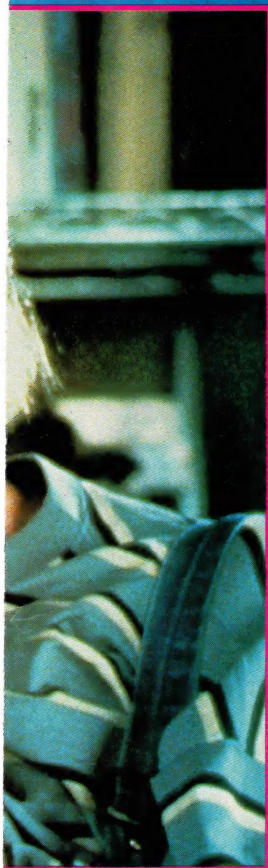


Fahey's face for reference photos provided reference points for the computer animation team to create an exact likeness of the actor.

Says Hunt, "The big challenge here was to create environments for Virtual Reality that were believable. To date, Virtual Reality graphics have been pretty low-resolution. This story called for us to present what Virtual Reality will be like at least five years into the future and so we had to come up with graphics that would allow objects to change shape, transform and do different things with light and motion.

"What's interesting about the VR sequences we generated for this movie is that more than one person can become involved in a particular scene. That is something current technology is not quite capable of. What we have created is not just thrown in as a special effect. Key story moments take place in the Virtual Reality world.

Among the other computer animation suppliers who contributed to the film's razzle-dazzle is San Francisco's Xaos, Inc., which devised a "particulation" effect, turning



COMPETITION

**10 COPIES OF FIRST INDEPENDENT'S
LAWNMOWER MAN
TO BE WON**

Thanks to First Independent we can offer you the chance to enter the weird world of Virtual Reality, by winning a copy of *Lawnmower Man*. To be in with a chance, just tell us which Stephen King book the story first appeared in. Get your entries into; Hover Bovver Comp., Video World Magazine, PO Box 381, Millharbour, London E14 9TW. Closing date is November 20th, or you've had your micro-chips!

characters into random particles which vibrate away from each other, swirl into a violent vortex and then disperse into the air. Says the director: "Even the violent moments in this film exploit a futuristic technology aesthetic. Jobe kills people by "particulating" them. It's a bloodless way to die." Continues Leonard, "We love this technology and the film gets way into it. But the way the story presents this new science and its potential for misuse was scaring us even as we were making the film. So we knew it was going to scare audiences even more."

But why call it *The Lawnmower Man*? Leonard laughs as he replies, "People said to us, 'Why don't you change that title?' I said, 'Because I love that title. People won't be expecting this. The title gets their attention and when they find out the movie is about VR they are even more intrigued. I kind of enjoy that. If it were to have been called *Cybergod* or something like that, it would all have been too obvious."

In the final analysis *The Lawnmower Man* isn't exactly a great movie, but its success can be attributed to the fact that it's the first film ever to take audiences into the amazing world of Virtual Reality. Eye-popping effects scenes are worth the rental price alone, and if this is indeed the shape of things to come

then who knows how we'll be enjoying our movie entertainment in years to come.

Let's leave the final word on the subject to VR expert Brad Hunt, who previously worked on the computer-generated effects of *The Last Starfighter* and *2010*. "Back in the early days," he notes, "the film-makers didn't really trust computers to do anything. Now we're doing eight minutes of actual storytelling - creating human-like databases that can act. Pretty soon we'll be able to do entire movies without living actors. That's progress for you..."

Should be interesting on Oscar night!